THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

For All The Saints

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What makes a saint? Extravagance. Excessive love, flagrant mercy, radical affection, exorbitant charity, immoderate faith, intemperate hope, inordinate love. None of which is an achievement, a badge to be earned or a trophy to be sought; all are secondary by-products of the one thing that truly makes a saint, which is the love of God, which is membership in the body of Christ, which is what all of us, living and dead, remembered and forgotten, great souls and small, have in common. Some of us may do more with that love than others and may find ourselves able to reflect it in a way that causes others to call us saints, but the title is one that has been given to us all by virtue of our baptisms.

Weavings
Barbara Brown Taylor

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FOR ALL THE SAINTS

"...we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses..."
Hebrews 12:1

I confess I've always has a soft spot in my heart for Halloween. It has always been one of my favorite holidays; carving the pumpkin or watching it done with artistic expertise, and then the mysterious face flickering out of the darkness. Planning a suitable outfit in the days before you could, or would even if you could, walk to the corner store and purchase a likeness of Batman or Spiderman or an astronaut: managing to be out after dark with fellow conspirators to rain terror on the two elderly women who would not allow us to retrieve stray baseballs from their lovingly cultured flower garden – by ringing the doorbell and then hiding across the street to watch as they emerged and peered out into the dark and yelled, "We know you're out there and we know who you are and we're going to call your parents." It was high drama and adventure. Soaping windows was the ultimate terrorist activity, strictly forbidden by my parents. I did it once and I still feel a little guilty about it. When we read Psalm 25:7, "Do not remember the sins of my youth," one of the incidents that crosses my mind is soaping Miss Crick's windows. And of course, legitimate parties with everybody feeling a little foolish, wrapped in bed sheets with eye holes cut to see through, and our mother's house dress or father's old hat.

And then it became a favorite again as I carved the pumpkin carefully and helped with the plans and then escorted a ballerina, clown, nurse, cowboy and tiny tiger up and down dark streets with sacks filling impressively with unimaginable treats – some of which parents enjoyed after the collectors were asleep, or as a young pastor, promoting "Trick or Treat for UNICEF," trying to convince local members of the then prominent John Birch Society in northern Indiana that it was, in fact, an act of Christian love, not treason, to put food in the mouths of Chinese and Cuban and East German children. That too was an adventure.

I love it still, all of it, even more so now because the origins of the whole business have come into focus for me. It all began as one of our holidays, and in its origins attempted to express one of the great mysteries of our faith for which we have a descriptive phrase, "The Communion of Saints."

Actually, the origins of Halloween pre-date Christianity, and are found in the ancient Celtic festival of the dead, called Samhain. November marked the New Year in the Celtic world, when cattle and sheep were moved to closer pastures, all the grain was stored and winter darkness was about to descend. The Celts believed that the souls of all who had died during the year moved on Samhain, November 1, to the otherworld. So, on the evening before, the souls, spirits, ghosts of the dead were out and about, in transit, as it were. The Celts made it into a festival. Animals were sacrificed, fruits and vegetables gathered and shared, great bonfires built to light the way for the dead. It was also a little frightening with all those spirits and ghosts out and about.

When Christian missionaries came from Ireland to Scotland and the Celtic lands of Northern Europe, they converted, or attempted to convert, cultural custom as well as individuals by absorbing, redefining and renaming and so Samhain became All Saints Day, the occasion to remember and celebrate the lives of the departed and to revere those special men and women who were recognized as saints by the

church. The night before All Saints was called All Hallow's Eve and, obviously, Hallow's Eve has evolved into Halloween.

The conversion of Samhain didn't actually work. It never does. We're still fighting an uphill battle to reclaim Christmas from the pagan year-end celebration of the winter solstice and Easter from the pagan fertility rites of spring, but that's another story and at least two more sermons. Samhain went underground and emerged centuries later as Halloween. All Saints became one of the seven feasts or festivals of the Christian church and remains so for churches in the high or liturgical traditions and even now, our own. But Halloween bumps along with much of the old Celtic intent intact.

Barbara Brown Taylor reflects: "The ancient customs survived for thousands of years for a reason and the reason seems to have everything to do with our need to remember those who have died, to acknowledge the gulf between the living and the dead but also to reach across it, at least this day of the year, and to recognize those who have gone before us and whom we are certain to follow." ["A Great Cloud of Witnesses" in *Weavings*, Sept/Oct 1988. I am indebted to Taylor for the material on Samhain and All Saints as well.]

The writer of the *Letter to the Hebrews* remembers and recognizes that need. In fact, he is writing to people who, probably more than anyone else in history, needed some connection to and encouragement from those who had gone before. Those Christian men and women in the last decades of the first century faced a truly frightening future. There weren't very many of them; they were small, weak, powerless. Rome had decided that they were a threat to public order and the social fabric and already the whole weight and might of the Empire was about to turn violently against them. Jesus was gone, and now the apostles had all died. And so the writer remembers, for those frightened people, those who have gone before, who have fought the fight, finished the race and are now a resource, an inspiration, a hope. "Remember Noah and Abraham and Sarah and Samson and David ... we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses."

Don't you love the image of a "great cloud of witnesses?" That's what the Communion of Saints means. Those who have gone before us. "Everyone we ever loved and lost" is the way Frederick Buechner puts it. Everyone – our parents, grandparents, our teachers, models, mentors and cheerleaders, "including the ones we didn't know we loved until we lost them."

Thomas Lynch is a poet and essayist who is also a funeral director in Milford, Michigan. He has written a wonderful book which is receiving a lot of critical attention, and has won the Heartland Book Award. The title is *The Undertaking* and in it Lynch reflects with respect, affection and humor and love on his profession, his community and his own family.

"Every year I bury a couple hundred of my townspeople," he writes [p. 3]. Lynch lives with a gentle but very real awareness of his friends and neighbors he has buried. "For every home made memorable by death, dozens are made memorable by the lives that were led there utterly unscrutinized by the wider world – lives lived out at a pace quickened only by the ordinary triumphs of daily life: good gladiolas, the well-shoveled walk, the mortgage payments made, the kids through college." [p. 106]

Midway through the book, Lynch, who inherited the business from his father and who works with his brother and sisters, discusses his parents' deaths; his anger at God at his mother's pain and suffering; his respect and love for his father.

"My mother's funeral was a sadness and a celebration. We wept and laughed and thanked God and cursed God and asked God to make good on our mother's faith laid claim to in her death. It was Halloween the day we buried her – the eve of All Saints." [p. 98]

On a recent trip back to Pennsylvania we did what most of us do when we go home. We visited the cemetery: found the place, stood and looked at the inscriptions, that stunning experience of seeing your parents' names there and grandparents and aunts and uncles and some you didn't know but who share the name, the family, the Communion of Saints.

So I was engaged by Lynch's reflection. "Whenever I have business at Holy Sepulcher, I stop in section 24, where my mother and father are buried. He lived on after her for two more years ... I miss them so ... sometimes I stand among the stones and wonder. Sometimes I laugh, sometimes I weep. Sometimes nothing at all happens. Life goes on. The dead are everywhere." [p. 98]

Have you noticed how your parents keep showing up in your life? A friend of mine, Gloria Wilson, is the president of a board on which I am a member. Gloria is a professor and department head at the University of Arizona, a very sophisticated woman. She opened a meeting recently by apologizing to some members for having neglected to thank them properly for something they had done, and she made a bigger deal of it than seemed appropriate. She explained, "My mother – may she rest in peace – nagged at me all my life to say 'thank you'." She looked up and said, "So, mother – you can relax now, I've made amends and said thank you." Everybody laughed because something like that happens to all of us.

Russell Baker, in his memoir, *The Good Times*, tells how, decades after her death, he can still hear his mother saying, "If there's anything I hate, it's a quitter. Some day you might make something of yourself, Russell." [*The Good Times*, p. 344-351]

Have you noticed that you even say the same things your parents said? Have you surprised yourself, as I have, having expressed an opinion about this or that and said to yourself, "why, I sound just like my father." My partner tells me straight out, "You're sounding like Blanche now."

And have you noticed the mystery that your relationship with those who have died somehow continues, that you seek and enjoy your parents' approval, or wonder what they might say about this or that, and you actually have a kind of conversation with them? It is important, the psychologists tell us, to continue working at issues that remain unresolved, sometimes very painfully so. It is important, and possible, to forgive someone who is gone. In fact, accepting and forgiving a parent, a brother, a sister, who died prematurely before there was a chance for the gradual process of mature acceptance and reconciliation to happen, can be very important.

Who doesn't in a sense know their parents better at the age of 40 or 50 or 60 than we did when we were 15 or 20 or 30? Madeleine L'Engle describes how she learned to know and understand her father far more after his death than during his life. She writes, "Here we are on the border of Christian mystery. We are not meant to be separated as we have become from those who have gone before us and those who will come after us." [*Walking on Water*, p. 80]

In Presbyterianism and Protestantism generally there are no official saints. At the time of the Reformation, the whole system of canonizing saints and venerating saints was abolished. The Episcopalians have saints – 140 of them – and I think it's time for the rest of us to reconsider. It was the corruption of the system that prompted the strenuous objection of the Reformers. In fact, Luther nailed his 95 Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg on the day before All Saints to make his point. In 1516 All Saints in Wittenburg was a carnival. Frederick the Wise had put on display 19,012 holy relics including a thorn from Jesus' crown, a tooth from St. Jerome, four hairs from the head of the Virgin Mary. If you viewed all the relics and made a contribution, you received an indulgence, worth a very significant reduction in the time you would otherwise spend in Purgatory – 1,902,207 years plus 270 days to be exact." [*Here I Stand*, Roland Bainton, p. 53]

That's what Luther objected to. That's what he wanted to discuss in his Theses, and when it became clear that there could and would be no reformation, no real discussion from within, and a new church, Lutheran – Reformed, began to emerge, the entire system of saints was left behind.

Too bad, because in the process we gloss over and miss one of the most profound mysteries of our faith. It's time to recover the notion and bring it back into the church. The fact is we have saints. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has its saints. Fourth Presbyterian Church has its saints. Every church does. I visited a different Presbyterian congregation every Sunday last year and in every one of them I either met or saw a portrait on a wall, or heard a story about a saint. "I'd like you to meet Mr. Smith; he's one of our saints … That picture is Mildred, superintendent of the Primary Department for 56 years: taught hundreds—thousands of children: one of the saints around this place."

And you and I have saints, even if we don't call them that. I learned a helpful metaphor for the Communion of Saints years ago. I think about it a lot and I've included it in sermons before and I have concluded that it ought to be told at least once a year. The metaphoric figure for the Communion of Saints is "the balcony." It came originally, I believe, from Carlyle Marney, a big, robust, delightful Southern Baptist preacher, scholar and healer of broken ministers.

Marney used to say that your personhood, your personality, persona, is like a house, and it's a fairly elaborate and complex structure. Some are fancy. Some are sophisticated. Some are simple and functional. Some are ostentatious. Some are modest. Each has a number of rooms: a formal parlor for greeting guests, a family room, bedroom, kitchen. Marney said each of us has in the structure of our persona a basement where the plumbing is and the trash is stored. No need to spend your life down there, Marney used to say. Everybody has a basement. Come on up into the sunshine. Sometimes we act as if the plumbing and trash bin are all there is to us, Marney observed.

And if you come upstairs and step outside onto the lawn and look up, you will see that the house that is you has a spacious, gracious balcony. There are people up there on your balcony. Marney was a Southerner, so his balcony was white wrought iron with wicker rocking chairs. There are people in the rocking chairs on your balcony sipping iced tea or bourbon, depending on whether you are a Baptist or Presbyterian, Marney used to say. The people on your balcony are the strong, positive influences in your life. Your heroes and heroines. Your models and mentors. Your parents are probably up there … your grandparents. There are some folk up there you never met but they influenced and helped shape you and there are some really big names up there: people whose lives inspired you from afar and called deeper faith out of you and courage and stamina and love and discipline.

The people on your balcony are your saints. The way to observe All Saints Day is to walk out onto your lawn, look up and greet them. Call the roll. Name them. Wave to them. Your saints – your dear ones – the great ones and small ones: your mother and father maybe, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, your old coach, your piano teacher.

The very notion of the Communion of Saints makes more sense and becomes more precious the longer you live. Life, many have observed and we have experienced, is an accumulation of losses and the longer you live the more you accumulate; we joke about turning to obituaries first, but it's true. "The extraordinary rent you have to pay as long as you stay," Annie Dillard puts it.

But the final and great mystery of our faith is that those who have gone before us are with God, that "God will wipe all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow or crying ... for the former things are passed away." The final mystery of our faith is that in Jesus Christ whose own death did not defeat him, but led to the victory of life over death, of love over hatred, of forgiveness over revenge ... in Jesus Christ we know, although we do not have words adequate to say it, that nothing of love is ever lost, that we can trust those we love to God's care, that

> "when the strife is fierce, the warfare long, steals on the ear the distant triumph song
> and hearts are brave again, and arms are strong. Alleluia! Alleluia!"

In Jesus Christ we know, even though we do not have words big enough to say it that they are all there, that we too are part of that cloud of witnesses, that communion of saints, that great chorus singing praises to God throughout eternity, that we add our voice to the chorus for awhile and when our voices are silent, the mighty chorus singing before goes on after us, forever and ever. World without end.

Amen.

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O God, we are grateful for those whose lives have given us life and strength, whose faithfulness enabled us to have faith, whose love called deeper and better love out of us. Keep them, and us, in your care forever, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.